

Sirius, Book IV

A Slave's War

Comments or Questions?

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Chapter 7

The sun had just risen, and the gentle rocking motion of the boat woke Alps slowly. He rubbed his eyes, and found his bed to be barren of Nita, who he expected would be there. It was still so early, but he pulled on his trousers, having slept spooned lovingly up to his life-mate-to-be, and padded up to the deck to see where everyone could be scarcely beyond the dawn. He didn't bother with his shirt, as he did not know if he would be heading back to bed when he found that breakfast was not ready. The grayish morning light showed mist coiling and spilling about on the ocean water, but rising on the port side of the ship was land. They had made it, and had weighed anchor on what seemed to be a completely unpopulated stretch of shoreline. The shore itself looked rocky and inaccessible, and the ocean was a little choppy up close to it.

"Here then?" Alps asked, spotting Nidaja and Nita standing with Lira. The three of them seemed fully dressed and quite awake. Nita wore her royal robes with rather nice gilding, Nidaja her usual cape and leather armor. The newly appointed guide wore a rather bright outfit, red and violet with gold trim. It did not seem like the thing a survivalist would wear, but it looked nice on her with her green fur. Her cape, a little less ornate than Nidaja's, was deep red, sweeping the ground behind her a little. She nodded.

"It's about ten miles further north than I had originally intended, based on the curve of the land, but it'll suit us as a starting point. Still far from any towns or villages. Misha and Uri navigate very precisely without a familiar port to steer toward, or a light to guide them." Uri slipped her hand over Alps' back, startling him a bit as he turned and found her there with Misha.

"Glad to hear it, Lira. You did not choose the safest location to drop off. The rowboat... will maybe have some issues with those rocks." Uri wore the silky outfit that Alps had seen her wear the first day they met, a deep violet crossed in an 'X' over her chest to her hips to barely cover her breasts, then coming back around her hips as a belt which held up short white canvas shorts. Her belt held that heavy-looking short axe, just as she had that first day. It was rather nostalgic. Misha wore a simple button-up blue shirt and long dark brown trousers, seeming more like she was there to work than to look good on the ship, but her short fur, tall and strong body and angular features left her sexy nonetheless. Alps looked back to the rocks. The water did seem dangerous around them.

"They will be fine." Lira stated softly, crossing her arms. "We can navigate them easily enough when we get closer. Those rocks are further apart than they look from here. We will do alright." She nodded to Alps, as if he was expected to know that. Nidaja spoke up with a smile.

"Well, we will set out on land in a couple of hours. I am going to assist Luna and Vhale in getting the supplies together. Vhale has gracefully agreed to carry a little extra of the perishables, since those won't last forever. We will eat a little better for a time for that."

"What shall I do?" Alps asked, looking back and forth. Putting supplies together and carrying them used to be what he did. He was not used to being any higher in rank than the very bottom, so it was a little unusual to think of Vhale pulling the load. However, it was Alps who determined that Vhale would be a slave in service of the Amani Queen.

"Are you okay with tiring yourself out before you even get on land, Alps?" Nita asked, giving a smile that was a little disarming. Alps backed up slightly at that, and then smiled.

"Oh! Of course. Just because you released me of my obligations doesn't mean I wanted to stop serving you, my love." His words were very clear with intent and meaning. He wanted to make sure that Nita knew that the wolf would always want to lighten her burdens, and those of his friends any way that he could. It was not about his duty, it was about his love. Nita gave a very playful grin, and then nodded to Misha and Uri.

"He's all yours. Just make sure he can walk when you are done." Alps nearly flinched at her words. It was not so much that she said it, he knew that she intended to still share him with her closest friends because of the happiness and pleasure that she knew he could give them, it was that she was willing to candidly do something like that right in front of Lira, who they hardly knew. He looked back to Uri, who took him by one of his wrists. She noticed the look of surprise on his face, it seemed, as she murmured sultrily,

"You didn't think you were gonna make this trip and not get a chance to spend a little time with your friends. It might be a while before we see you again, so we are not gonna squander this opportunity." Alps furtively glanced to Misha, who was already following as he was being lead to below-deck. He flittered his wings cheerfully and looked back to Nita.

"I won't take too long." He promised, knowing that everyone was about ready to get under way, but he could not disagree with the intentions behind what Uri and Misha wanted. While they did not come out and say it, this might very well be the last time they got to see Alps at all. It was true, even if sad, and they would not want to think

they did not get to say goodbye in their intimate fashion. Still, Alps refused to let himself think about it like that. They wanted to have fun, he would make sure that they did.

Alps was lead back to his own cabin where he and Nita had been sleeping perhaps hours before. The bed was unmade as he had not expected to be coming back so soon. He smiled at Uri and Misha, knowing very well what they had planned for him. He rumbled softly,

"I have missed you both. I guess Nita could tell." He was nearly at a whisper. Alps felt kind of guilty that she felt like she might have to share his affections with others, but she was a good friend to these girls, and cared deeply about their happiness, just as he did his. If they were not interested, or if he were not, he was sure she would not have made this a point. He glanced around the room. It seemed darker than he remembered it, but it was perhaps because he just came back from above deck, or because of the intimate encounter he was sure was about to transpire.

"We know. And we miss you as well. When all of this is over... calmed down... you will see us more. There will be less cause for all of the back and forth." Misha's tone was soothing and smooth, her usual calm demeanor always a treat for Alps. Uri was less calm, pulling her shorts off and rather severely grabbing Alps' shoulders and casting him down onto the bed.

"Oh! Heh! You missed me too I see!" he huffed as he put his hands over his head as he lay back on the bed. He wondered if the tone was to stay the same. Was Uri about to ravage him? He would not mind, but that would be exhausting.

"Remember, love..." Misha said of her sweet black-furred partner, "... He is to be able to travel when we are done. I know that look in your eyes. Lyat will not thank you for having to carry Alps the first day or so of their journey." Uri put her hands on her hips, bare with her shorts missing. She did not hide what she wanted. She looked back and flattened her ears.

"They didn't give us long."

"It was plenty of time." Misha encouraged. She slipped out of her boots and trousers, smiling at her lover and then unbuttoning her shirt, her slender, quick tail wagging. "Maybe we should ask Alps what he wants. I bet he doesn't just cuddle and talk this time." She shot him a playful glance. Alps was already undoing his belt. Oh no... It would not be a gentle late night conversation this time. Uri paused a moment, then spoke up.

"Alright, Alps. You get to decide. How would you like your dear friends after so long an absence?" The white lupine sat up a bit, and gazed back and forth between the two of them. He considered that a moment. It had been a while since he was with either of them. In that time, he had traveled a long way, and had sampled things from Nidaja's point of view, and then tried a few of those things in his own form, and found

them not only likable to him, but also to those he shared himself with. If Nidaja enjoyed those things so much, surely the fiery Uri might as well. He grinned broadly.

“Oh, he’s got something there, don’t you Alps?” Uri said, uncrossing her top and pulling it off of herself. The garment was a simple, long, flowing band of silky material that coiled in a very specific way to form the top that she wore. It was elegant in how simple it was, needing not even a clasp to stay on and deliciously tight on her body. Alps looked at the long ribbon that said top became, and then glanced about the room. The bed had two metal rails on the wall above it used to secure it up in high seas to keep it from being cast across the room and into someone unfortunate enough to be present. Alps looked back to Misha and chuckled.

“I remember upon our meeting you were not so keen on knowing the feel of a male sating himself with you, Misha.” Alps watched her wilt a little. He knew she made the exception for him, but she still definitely preferred Uri.

“It’s true, I didn’t, but I have grown to like it.” She stated this in her still soothing tone. “...With you at least.”

“Even so...” Alps said, moving over and slipping his hand over Uri’s chest. She cupped her hand over his, as he gave an appraising squeeze of her round mammary. Her nipple found itself pertly pinched between his fingers as he gave a rolling, sampling squeeze, getting a happy squeak out of the girl. Alps loved that sound, and being able to intentionally bring it made him feel powerful. He felt his wings warm. It was so easy to tell now when he was bringing happiness. He could not imagine giving up the wings anymore.

“Even so?” asked the taller grey female. Alps leaned down and picked up the long silken sash that comprised the top part of Uri’s outfit and gazed at her.

“Even so, I think you would have more fun making it so your beloved was the one who could not walk tomorrow... with the help of a close friend.” Uri’s pupils overtook her irises, the girl backing up a little, sitting on the bed. She grinned sheepishly and spoke.

“Uh... Alps seems to have become more confident. You looking to play a game, hon?” Despite their size difference, with Alps being easily a head taller, the wolf was certain that he could not overpower the young royal guard, but he knew Misha and he both could do it. He grinned broadly at the girl, and spoke commandingly.

“I went to the noble and mighty Asuna capital and I’ve had their empress pinned beneath me, begging for my seed. That sort of thing leaves one with well deserved confidence.” Misha looked at him wide-eyed. Technically, he was not lying. Uri was speechless as well, and it gave Alps the opening he wanted. He slipped over to her, and looped the sash twice around her wrist, before pulling it up through one of the bars

to tie the bed up, then across to her other hand, up to the other bar, through and to the other hand again. In mere seconds, Uri pulled at her bindings, wide-eyed.

"I... I think he might have done this before." Misha's eyes were wide as well. Alps grinned sadistically at the lovely, but smaller Uri. She gave a mock fearful whimper, and Misha got on her knees on the bed.

"I am liking where this is going. Uri gets to be the naughty one with me all the time." She slipped in front of her, and brought her lips to the smaller female's chest. Uri gasped as that nipple was likely softly bitten, and tensed greatly.

"Nnnh... Gentle now... I'm not used to being the one tied up. Did you get this idea from our games, Alps?" she asked. He smiled to her and slipped a hand over Misha's backside, which she welcomed with a wiggle of her hips.

"Perhaps. It's been a while though. I hope I haven't gotten rusty." He crooned as he slipped behind the taller mountain grey. She stroked her hand downward and caressed Uri's tummy. Alps slipped his hand around his already fully erect shaft, and teased the velvety mound of the grey-furred lady wolf. She did not shy away from him. Alps flicked his ears a bit. If he wanted, he could just sink into her, but he knew Uri would protest, longing for such treatment herself. Alps slipped over to the drawer that his vest and such were kept in, and pulled out the cords that were used to strap the bed in place in a storm. He tied the cord to Uri's legs, just where her knee bent where she knelt on the bed. He drew each long cord to the leg of the bed on the side that the leg was on, which pulled her legs apart rather wide.

"It's a little different being the one tied..." Uri whispered, and then gasped. Alps sat down on the floor by the bed, facing forward with his back to the edge of the bed; his soft, warm wings pinned against it and just dropped his head back. His muzzle was the perfect size and perfect angle to tuck against her sweet-smelling mound. Misha was perhaps going to say something to her lover, but Alps' hand moved up easily and confidently between the taller girl's thighs, two fingers spreading her already wet entrance easily. She groaned instead of spoke, losing what she intended to say. She bit her lover instead, who gave a matching groan as Alps began to work his hand without shame in those clutching wet, powerful walls. He used his thumb to wriggle and rub on that fleshy nub, biding his time before he showed them both something unique.

"He's just as good as ever and so much more ... willing..." panted Misha finally. Uri was voiceless, huffing as she found herself so trapped and helpless against him. This was new to her, perhaps. At least, it was likely new to her with a male. He fluttered his tongue over those heavily blood-laden petals, feeling her pulse on that flexible, eager muscle as he pushed it deep inside her tangy sex, but there was a new pulse he was just getting used to feeling from them both. Their pleasure he felt in his little wings. He was sure he could get used to it, but at first, he found it rather distracting. It was like a soft, delightful tugging each time a shock of pleasure went through each one of them. Alps cupped his mouth tighter to Uri and suckled, grinding

his tongue tightly to her clit, forcing her to buckle as best she could so tightly tied. He thought about the things he wanted to do to her. She wanted to be fucked, she was never shy about that, but how would he do it? The visions and options that passed through his head aroused him intensely, making his cock tick nervously against his tummy from time to time, and drool pre silently into the soft fur of his belly.

“You want him inside you, don’t you, Uri?” Misha asked. Alps grinned. He knew this game already. She liked teasing her lover, getting her almost foaming at the mouth with lust. What she did next he didn’t expect. The grey wolf female drew back away from his penetrating fingers, her wetness covering his hand to the wrist, and she knelt over his lap. This was not what he had planned on, but he was curious about her. She stroked his cock as she leaned back a little, to give her beloved a clear view of its pinkened, hot, heavily swollen form, almost bluish at the tip from how tightly that skin was stretched over trained and unyielding muscle. Alps ached for her touch as she stroked him, but did not move his mouth, his view confined to the underside of a twitching black tail as Uri’s inner flesh jerked softly around his tongue, wanting very much what Misha was making her look at.

“Yes, my love... Oh yes, please let me have him... All the way inside me... I want to feel his hips to mine... Oh dear love...” He pistoned his tongue inside her a little heavier at that point. The white lupine wanted her to think of that turgid shaft doing just that in her spongy, tightly clutching walls. He was almost ready to give her the reward he intended for them both but then sucked in a deep, anxious breath. Misha took his entire cock in a single stroke. He had certainly not expected that, but she was soaking wet as she gripped him inside her, and he could feel the soft back and forth motion of her needful hips, even as she perhaps tried to hold still. Had she changed in her preference so much as to yearn for him? His surprise at the suddenness of it almost cast him too far.

“Nnk!” He grunted, tightening, nearly spilling his seed at how blindingly tight she was. He was her only male partner, after all. The white wolf focused on Uri’s pleasure instead. Push his essence forward... find his aura, find hers... Lock the two, entwine them... Stroke her... Stroke her... Stroke her...

“HaaaAAAAAAA-nnnph!” Uri’s climax slammed over her like a collapsing building, making her lover squeeze tight around Alps. The queen’s beloved then slipped his hand down over Misha’s sex.

“I have him inside me, love... all to myself... I’m gonna hold him in me until I cum... Isn’t that unfair...?” she said, beginning to ride him. Alps quivered a bit at that. He wanted to give her the same shock that he did to Uri, who was winded, quivering, and stunned by it. It was a wonderful trick to have been taught by the Asuna empress, though raw sex was still his favorite. Still, this new trick would be fun to show this pair. He let Misha begin to stroke herself over his cock, knowing she was leaning back to let Uri see that idolized cock slipping in and out of her lover as she struggled to recover from a sudden, forced climax.

"You better not... make him cum... You said that was mine." She was heaving with shocked exasperation.

"Uh oh, I think he'll cum before I can pop, love!" she teased. Her voice was tense, but playful. He loved how playful and light-hearted these two girls could be.

"Think again." Alps said, looking into her eyes, pushing his fingertips to her clit, and hitting her as hard as he could with the essence of his pleasure.

"Oh *sweet lily FUCK!*" cried the larger mountain grey as her sex contracted painfully around his cock and her honey spilled down his aching sack. "HaaaAAH!" she cried, shaking, holding his shoulders.

"See? That's what you get." Uri panted.

"Alps, what did you..." The white lupine put a finger to Misha's lips and smiled.

"I am gonna tongue your pretty Uri. I want you to help. I want us to get her off harder than she's ever gotten before." He felt Misha squeeze around him again. As she recovered from the shock of her forced release, Alps moved his head back, and began pushing his tongue deep inside the tangy honeypot of his dark-furred friend. She bucked her hips softly, before Misha figured out what Alps meant by help. Working hard to keep his cock inside her, she leaned down and pushed her lips to Uri's sex, her tongue stroking over Alps' tongue erotically as she teased her lover's clit with quick, flickering strokes of that strong and practiced pink muscle. He did not use that little trick anymore. He wanted this gift to be entirely from him and Misha. The quivering mass of the girl's smaller young lover made it obvious that it would not take long. Misha began to ride Alps' hips slowly, but more in a lusty, wanting fashion than trying to spark her climax again. Alps knew he could not handle a hard ride from her at that point. He'd certainly burst. Tying Uri up really got the former slave going. Playing with them so happily thrilled him.

Alps shot his tongue up into her as hard as he could, mouth opened wide, and his body burning with need as he felt the sexy sensation of Misha's tongue joining his in licking up into the writhing, whimpering, quivering Uri. He was thankful as Misha stopped moving to focus on her lover. There would be time for pleasure for her. She might enjoy a ride on that same tongue later.

"Yes... Oh yes love, thank yooooou... Oh this feels so good..." Uri was certainly easy to read, and the pair doubled their efforts, not letting up. This was a fast rise to release but their time was limited. Teasing was not what they had the time for. Misha groaned into Uri's sex, and Alps was sure that it was to vibrate her tongue, to make her cum harder, but the grey lover's hips began to stroke him again. He whined, needful and frantic. He panted into Uri's sex, letting her rest slightly from his constant and rhythmic pumping.

“Misha, c-calm yourself. I’m close to squirting as it is...”

“Cum in her Alps... She deserrrrrves it.” Uri crooned.

“I’ll cum...” Alps warned again, as Misha failed to yield. He tried hard to hold out, but he could not focus on licking Uri anymore, and he certainly could not use his essence on her this close to his climax.

“Do it Alps... Fill me.” Misha whimpered loudly. She was going to cum. He had to hold out a little bit longer, but could already feel his sack drawing tight. It was becoming almost involuntary because of the pressure of their pleasure on his wings. It was such a pleasurable experience that he was still getting used to. He gave in.

“I’m cumming!” he cried, letting both of them know. It was all Misha needed, her sex clamping down tight as she exploded around him. Alps felt himself flung hard into climax, not having intended to give it to Misha, knowing that Uri wanted it. It left him only one sure, but steamy option. He rode out his climax and held Misha’s hips as she shook happily against him in bliss. She then began pitching her hips heavily back and forth, a bit longer, perhaps just rutting against him for the sake of sex with him before returning to Uri’s pleasure. Alps groaned as she slowly continued working his cock inside her, but returned his attention to the black-furred female. Both tongues abused her wonderfully, and she pulled against her bindings as she tightened and relaxed for the oncoming catastrophic release. When it hit, Alps had her honey spill down his cheeks and neck and chest. His legs kicked out a bit as he felt the shock of her climax rushing like wind over his wings. Misha leaned back, catching her breath as Alps fluttered his tongue over her clit to let her ride out her climax hard.

“Good girl! Let it all out for Alpsie!” she cried, stroking him back to his fullest arousal inside her. It was not long before he was ready again. She slipped off of him, and then watched as Alps rolled onto his knees and untied Uri’s legs.

“D-Don’t untie me yet, I can’t stand.” She whimpered so pitifully.

“You think I’m done with you?!” Alps growled lustfully. He picked up her hips, her hands balling into fists as she was suspended slightly and then pushed up against the wall, her body bridging between her male lover and the wall of the cabin. He slammed into her, making her cry out.

“Oh by dawn’s light Alps!” cried Uri, obviously not unhappy with the treatment. His cock was as rigid as ever, throbbing with frantic need as he hilted himself inside her. Uri squeaked again and again as Misha crooned in wonder as the sudden frenzied attack on her mate. Alps was not known by them, at least, to be rough, but there he was, threatening to push the black-furred lady wolf out through the wall, hips shocking her with each powerful stroke. He gritted his teeth as he pulled her legs up so they rested over the crook of his elbows as he held her up, occasionally pushing into her and

letting the wall act as resistance and sometimes pulling her to meet him, shaking her quite heavily as her breasts bounced hard on her chest. Misha squirmed as she watched. Despite a bit surprised, she seemed happy with the ravaging her mate was getting.

“That’s it, Alps. She’s had *this* coming for a long, long time.” Alps felt Misha’s hand on his haunches, stroking him perhaps just to feel the force and power he was using on Uri. Alps gritted his teeth, panting through them heavily as he fucked the girl harder. He had to make sure that Uri remembered this for a while. The loud thumping of Uri’s shoulders against the wall was a din he took pleasure in. “Harder Alps! Fuck her harder!” Misha growled, delighting in the abuse of her naughty and strong-willed mate.

“M-Misha! I d-don’t think he c-can!” cried Uri. “Oh fuck!” Alps did. He drove himself harder into her, and she squeaked with each impact. He wanted to cum inside her. That’s what he was working for now. Her pleasure would happen too, or it would wait a moment. This was for one purpose only. To feel what it was like to serve the pleasure of a very hungry Letai wolf. His wings’ light overpowered the candles in the room, white light showing the true color of everything Alps could see on the wall and the bed, though Uri’s face was covered in the shadow of his body, since his wings were mostly behind him.

“Alps, that’s so beautiful...” Misha marveled with soft, anxious panting. She placed her hand on one of those wings, but was leaning against his back a little. Alps knew why, without even turning around. He could feel her pleasure. She was stroking her clit with her fingertips in mounting desire to join in the fun, or perhaps fantasizing about being the next one to enjoy that kind of ravaging. Alps folded back his ears. He liked thinking about Misha masturbating to what she saw, but he was jarred from that line of thought as wet heat splashed his crotch, and Uri screamed. Alps fucked her harder against the wall, shaking that scream out of her.

“Heavens...” came a soft feminine voice from out in the hall. He was not certain who it was. Had Nita been watching through a crack in the door? Had it been Luna? Was she seeing what kind of lover her son had become? The shock of that image played itself through his naughty mind, skimming over even an image of her on her knees, hand slipped between her thighs to enjoy the show, and the taboo of it jerked the climax right to the front of the line.

“Fuck!” Alps barked lewdly, spraying his essence hard in Uri. She squealed in recognition as he ground her tight against the wall, and Misha gave a panicked little sound of determination, and then a sinking, satisfied groan as she stroked her sex to release. Alps tilted his head back, and became aware of little balls of light, not very large, no more than fireflies swirling around him. That was new. He panted heavily, still throbbing in Uri as he let the last few drops of his seed trickle inside her.

“Ohhhh...” Uri crooned, feeling so satisfied. Neither commented on the lights, so Alps was not sure if he was the only one that could see them. They then snapped in a flash to him, as if absorbed. He grunted at the shock of pleasure that ripped through him at their impact, knowing he gave another hard squirt to Uri by her happy yelp, and then he drew out of her, letting her knees back down to the bed. Alps turned and sat on the bed, his own legs tired, and then gasped loudly as Misha’s mouth overtook his cock. She certainly didn’t seem to hate at least one male lover. She thankfully did not attempt to work him to release again, seeming interested in sucking the taste of her panting, sputtering mate off his softening shaft. Alps leaned back a bit. He felt the dull ache in his legs that told him he would be able to walk, but he certainly wasn’t likely to be running any large distances any time soon.

“Oh that’s such a slutty image.” Misha giggled. Alps looked up at her with a sex-doped expression. The grey-furred female nodded over to Uri. She hung with her head down, arms out and up. She was still tied, heavily breathing but obviously unconscious. Her thighs were parted very wide from how heavily she was sagging from her wrist restraints, and there was a pool of thick, shamefully copious seed under her sex, connected by a thick, drooling streamer of it pouring from her. Alps blushed at that. She looked about as hard-fucked and used for pleasure as a girl possibly could. Alps looked back to Misha meekly. “... Don’t you dare apologize. I am gonna enjoy making her remember that when I pleasure her to get her off harder, Alps. You have no idea how often you come up as a subject of fantasy during sex. For both of us.” Alps’ ears went scarlet again.

About twenty minutes passed of just stroking, kissing, gentle caressing, and a lot of use of already abused towel to get the girls cleaned up at least enough to be presentable on deck for their departure. Alps did not look forward to saying goodbye, but he would do everything to make sure that it was not a final farewell. They got themselves composed and headed up on deck, leaving Alps to get a little more cleaned up, since he would be traveling with the scent of heavy, aggressive sex still on him. They both seemed to like the thought that everyone would know what he did, and be reminded of it the entire time they were downwind. They enjoyed more how much that thought seemed to embarrass Alps.

After the pair left, Alps sat on the now ruffled blankets and sheets and pillows and stretched a little, looking for a new towel or something to clean up a little bit more as the scent of his lusty exchange with his friends hung in the air. He would at least try to make himself tolerable when he got up on deck. He was sure Lira knew what his leaving with the sea-faring ladies was about, but he didn’t want to make it that blatant the whole foreseeable journey. He got himself cleaned up with someone’s kerchief, and pulled on his trousers. He finally put on his uniform blazer once he had cooled down enough. The open shoulders of the garment did little to really cool him down if he had been active. He pulled on his dark shoes, and as he looked up, he let go of the shoe he was pulling on, almost falling back on the bed. He sat on it heavily to avoid falling back, and peered at the figure in the corner, leaning against the wall by a portal too small to just climb through.

“Ellis! How long have you been in here?!” Alps cried. There was no way she could have slipped in without him noticing. She had to have seen that whole encounter. He felt himself go scarlet. Why did it embarrass him so much? She had apparently seen him with Luna and Ceriss, so this was no different, but he felt more reserved around her for some reason, as if Luna had watched, and not her. She was holding a light tan leather pack in her hand, barely above the floor, seeming relaxed. The light in the corner where she had been standing seemed to slowly grow, as if the sun were coming up and revealing the contents of a cave just below the horizon. It was a spooky effect. Could she obscure herself the way Ceriss could?

“I brought you a gift. It’s nice to see you too, Alps.” She approached him with a smile, her pupil-free eyes gazing at him blind-but-still-knowing. He felt the insides of his ears absolutely searing.

“You were bound to see that eventually, sneaking around like you do.” Alps stated, trying to make it her fault. He was not ashamed of it, so why was he embarrassed.

“I trust you have made a final decision concerning your wings?” the fox asked, seeming to not care at all about Alps’ embarrassment. The white wolf huffed softly. He then leaned back a bit, flittering those wings a little.

“Yeah, I decided to keep them. I guess you know that already, though.” He was beginning to think she just hid and watched him all the time. It was extremely unnerving. The things she must think of him!

“I did know. So I bring you this to help.” She placed the pack on the bed. Alps turned a bit and carefully opened the leather bag.

“We’re on the damn ocean. You can’t just go shopping.” He peered into the bag. It looked like clothing of some kind.

“I brought it with me, don’t be silly.” Ellis’ tone was completely casual, as if she had not seen Alps bolster his essence energy amid the sex-tortured screams of his friends. He pulled the garment out of the bag. It was a heavy black fabric cape which drew over the shoulders and cinched with a short gold chain and clasp over the chest. Also, there was a single pauldron that went on his right shoulder. It was made of several layers of dense, polished leather, with three silver bands that looped over the top of it to act as an additional guard for the leather itself. There was a silver chain that linked perhaps to his outfit or maybe to armor. Attached to the pauldron was a short sleeve of chain mail to offer the arm it covered a little additional protection. There was also a thicker belt for him to wear that had a pouch to carry Ressaia in, he assumed. The outfit looked like it was for serious travel and even battle. Alps was not trained to wear armor, so a single pauldron was perhaps as much protection as he could easily

wear, but it looked like it could stop a pretty stout blow, and made him feel a little more matched to Nidaja. He looked up at Ellis.

“Why are you giving me these things? They are fine quality. I might not be the best person to provide them to.”

“You will want to hide your wings. The cape is there for that. The shoulder guard is because you are not a warrior, but you will defend your friends if you must. You should at least hope to come away without injury.” Alps marveled at the gifts a moment, quietly touched.

“And the belt?” he asked wistfully.

“It is to keep your pants on. This has seemed something of a challenge for you.” Her words were blunt, and his ears went scarlet. She murmured after, “... I tease. You should laugh more.” He was unable to laugh just because he could not believe she made a joke. There was a short pause. “Aris... You are ready for this. You need little else than you have.”

“Where did I go when the Shadowfall collapsed?” he asked, not even knowing why he asked it, looking in his new pack. There was no answer. He sighed and looked up. Of course. Ellis was gone. “Damn it.”

The sea-spray moistened his black uniform as the boat lurched in the water, Lira and Nidaja manning the oars. The water was rough, but, as promised, the rocks were a lot farther apart when they were this close to them, and it was not too challenging for the skilled pair to get the boat to shore. In the craft Alps occupied was Nita, Nidaja, Lira, himself and his mother. Another boat piloted by Lyat and Reika carried most of their supplies, and Vhale as well. It followed close behind them. Both boats would just be left there, perhaps forever, or until some traveler found them and decided he wanted them. Nidaja's ship was already turning to sail back to Diera. It might be the last time Alps saw her sails. There was a bit of a heavy feeling to his feet as he slipped out of the boat to help haul it ashore. Lira was already up against the forest edge, the trees coming nearly right down to the ocean. It was a perfect spot to come ashore without really being noticed. Unless someone was visible right on the edge of the water, they would not have likely seen the group come ashore. It was well planned.

The sun was already high in the sky, and the trip over the water in direct sunlight had made Alps feel rather warm, so he was glad to get under the trees. It was good to be on solid ground, but he knew for much of his journey this would be unfriendly ground.

After everyone was safely in the shade and no longer visible from the ocean, enjoying the obscurity the tall, nicely spaced trees gave, they divvied out the supplies as

fairly as they could. Vhale shouldered a great deal deliberately, but it seemed to be that he wanted to lag behind enough not to be too close to Alps, who he still seemed anxious about, or even fearful of. It unsettled Alps a bit, but he would tolerate it, and try to be as friendly around Vhale as possible. He had hoped that as they formulated the plan they were using, he would treat the former slave a bit more normally, but the new wings seemed to have him spooked more than ever. Alps figured the effect would wear off when it was obvious that he had not changed, he just had wings now.

Alps took the new pack that Ellis had given him. He took out the cape and the shoulder guard and had Nidaja help him put it on, since he had never worn anything like it. She asked where he got it, and seemed unsurprised when he told her. She seemed perfectly comfortable with the fact that the fox came along. Perhaps she had met her once or twice before and had grown to trust her. She didn't really talk about it, but Alps suspected as much. He trusted Ellis, even if he didn't understand what she was up to.

Nita liked the addition to his outfit, and suggest he wear it more once they got back. Lira said it looked silly with only one shoulder guard, but Alps forgave her comment. He was not trying to impress her. His friends were already perfectly happy with him. Lyat and Reika yammered back and forth in Asuna, and were quite happy to have Lira walk with them and talk in their language with her. It was a nice novelty to hear the language spoken by a wolf. Alps walked alongside Nita and Nidaja, and Luna stayed with Vhale, who seemed to cheer up a bit in her presence.

The first two hours of their journey happened uneventfully enough. There were a lot of trees, and they became more and more dense. Lira assured them that there would be, if they continued to travel north, a dried up river bed that would allow fast, relatively safe travel affording them a view far ahead, and reduce the chances of being spotted at any great distance in any other direction. It would lead them a few miles north of Luca, where Alps intended to stop, but it would be several days of travel to get there. The forest made Alps need for wearing the cape a little less overheating, and the fact that it was a cape, and not a cloak made it the perfect accessory to hide his wings, since it gave him a bit more mobility. The pouch he had for putting Ressaia was perfect for the orb, and he felt a little sturdier with the shoulder guard even if Lira thought it was silly. Soon, they were plodding along and speaking to one another, joking, and actually having a good time. Lira would shush them occasionally and jump up to the lower branches of a tree to scout a little ahead for their safety. Seeing her jump like that was a reminder to Alps that she was an essence user too. They had six essence-users with them. The white lupine male figured that so many rarely travelled together, so a bandit might get a painful surprise if they misjudged this group.

As the warmest part of the day settled over them, they came out of rather dense underbrush into the dried up riverbed that had been promised to them. It was dusty, hot, and rather bleak in comparison to the rich forest. Alps knew immediately it would be less comfortable for him to travel in it, but he would tolerate it.

"This is a faster way to travel though..." Nidaja told him, seeming to realize he was distressed by the heat. "We will walk harder in the morning and late evening, and camp a bit during the day for our meal. It'll be fine." Alps smiled wryly as Lira hopped a good 18 feet into the air and onto a branch to scout ahead. As far as Alps could tell there were just a few rocks strewn along the riverbed and nothing worth looking at in either direction. He glanced to Nidaja again and rumbled,

"It's alright, I will probably get used to it after a while. This is certainly not the most uncomfortable I have been. At least I get to be with all my friends. You have no idea how grateful I am for that." He felt a wave of happiness from the general and the queen that he expected, and one from Reika that he did not. He feared that she might be getting too attached to him, and she would have to go back to Rios when all this was done. Alps didn't want to see her have to say goodbye like that, but she may have already set herself up for that heartbreak. He was considering that when he heard an angry tone from the tree above.

"Shit! Damnit, *draw up!*" Alps looked at Lira, dumbfounded. Nidaja pulled Alps forward with her, and Lyat pulled Nita back with him and Vhale. They seemed to know what Lira meant by that, and a second later, he understood. Twelve of the rocks that he had seen were not rocks. They were Uruk, hunched up and covered in extra clay to give them irregular shapes. He had not heard of such a trick before because raiding Uruk parties did not hide, they just attacked. These apparently were programmed to attack travelers by surprise.

"Really? We haven't been on land for half a day and we get attacked?" Nidaja barked in anger.

"Sorry guys! I saw what they were a minute too late. This is new!" Lira jumped down and drew her slender long sword. Luna moved alongside the queen to her defense with Vhale and Lyat. Alps felt better that his beloved was well protected, and he felt pretty safe with Nidaja. The Uruk were drawing closer, moving briskly but not running. The white-furred former slave was given a closer look at them as a result. They had almost egg-shaped bodies with oddly attached arms, thin and bug-like, digitigrade legs, and leather jacket-like clothing, but only the jacket. It seemed more to reduce weathering than to actually cover or protect them like armor. Each had two softly glowing oval crystal eyes, except one, which had four. Alps remembered that this meant there would be a larger variety of things this Uruk could do. This was likely the leader of the other eleven. Each had some kind of weapon. Most used a sharp spear with a blade bound to the front like a hook of some kind. Alps had not seen weapons like that before, but it was obvious that it was to compensate for the shortness in stature of the four to five foot tall golems, giving them added reach. They were caked with mud to disguise them as rocks, but had an almost turtle shell texture up close, made of hardened enchanted clay and other materials. Some parts looked waxy and soft, but mostly they looked hard and uncaring.

“Brother!” cried Reika, “Is we being allowed to break them? Asuna is not harming dirty Uruks, we will be in trouble!”

“If we is seen fighting along with Amani wolfs, there is being trouble anyways! We break them!” He drew a very heavy-looking two-handed sword with a single edge. It was so thick that it looked more like a very long axe than a sword.

“Reika gets to break Uruk?” the girl cried.

“Yes.” Lyat stated. The hyena girl screamed with delight, clutching bone. She reached into her pack.

“Finally!” She pulled out the dye that she used to put a face on her weapon.

“What the hell is she doing?!” Lira cried, moving up with Nidaja and Alps as Reika lagged behind. In mere moments, the Uruk would be upon them. Alps was not a fighter, he was not sure what he would do, but he would try to distract or deflect the Uruk to allow the real fighters to have at them.

“Reika is making ready for breaking!” She took her thumb with black dye and drew a line over the top of each of Bone’s eyes, angling the two lines down in the center. Alps stifled a laugh. She made Bone have angry eyes for the fight. Why was that so funny to him? He gritted his teeth, grinning as he looked forward, his heart racing.

“Are you fucking kidding me?” Lira said, bracing her foot behind her. “Protect Nita with your lives!” A crimson ball of blazing hot essence flew past her, knocking back the closest Uruk so hard that its limbs scattered over the riverbed for thirty yards back.

“Protect yourself!” Nita barked.

“Nita! Reserve your energy!” Nidaja said, and drew her gleaming ornate sword. The long-distance attack helped the odds a small amount. Alps agreed with Nidaja, however. That energy was finite for the queen, she would need to use it only if one got through and she was endangered more than Lyat could help. Alps turned and slipped his hand into his pouch, taking out the orb. It snapped into a staff, shocking Lira a bit. She had to shake her head a bit and focus on what was coming. They had slowed down as they approached, the clicking orders received from their leader moving them into a C shape so that they could surround the group a little as they rushed in. The top of the C unfortunately met with Reika first, who had charged ahead a little. She knocked a hooking spear to the side and just put her shoulder into the one she met, putting it on its back on the ground. Alps thought she might remove its weapon in that moment, as he expected that, but instead she jumped on top of it and just ripped its arm completely off, the weapon dropping from that before she rapidly and savagely beat its head in with duel-wielded Bone and arm, wind-milling it, shattering and scattering its eyes as others rushed away from her, not wanting any part of that.

Alps saw Lira engage one and Nidaja another. The green-furred guide reached hers first, and showed prowess with her slender blade, taking advantage of great speed, deflecting the weapon of her attacker and removing one of its “eyes” in the next hit, before it fell back, and another began dueling more effectively with her. Nidaja had two at once move up to her, so she had her hands immediately full, deflecting the weapons with ease, but they seemed to be able to keep enough pressure on her to prevent their demise as the other half of the group proceeded toward Nita, including the one with four eyes. Alps gritted his teeth. He decided if he attacked the most important of them, it would give Lyat better odds because it was likely that more would fight him and be distracted to protect their higher ranked Uruk. He sprinted to head off the group, and immediately had the attention of one of the normal ones. He used his staff, thankfully light with enough reach that he knocked that pointed weapon aside, and he struck the Uruk away. He felt a strange little shock through the staff, but ignored it. He had not really hit anything with it before.

The one with four eyes immediately turned on him, and drew a knife from inside its leather jacket. Alps held his staff at the ready, but it did not immediately approach him. Alps suddenly feared he was just being distracted, and turned to look at the other Uruk and defend himself if he was being attacked from behind. He did not understand what it was he was looking at. The Uruk was stabbing relentlessly at nothing. There was nothing in front of it, and it was attacking it with its spear, then twitching wildly, and attacking again. Alps looked at the staff again, and then at the four-eyed Uruk. He moved toward it, and it backed up, taking a defensive posture. It was afraid of him. What could cause that?

In a flash of insight, Alps understood. The staff could absorb essence attacks, he knew that, but the Uruk operated on essence in those crystal eyes. If that essence were disrupted, the Uruk would not function the way it was “programmed” to. He narrowed his eyes. Suddenly, his simple staff was a lot more formidable weapon for the fights that he knew would come. Greatly encouraged, Alps called out to the hyena girl, who had succeeded in pulling off her victim’s other arm and was getting up to fight more.

“Reika! I messed that one up! Fix him up!” Alps nodded toward the malfunctioning Uruk. She held up Bone and jumped up and down. She bolted toward the indicated Uruk, and Alps gritted his teeth, seeing three of the others squaring off against Luna and Lyat. He had to free up Lira or Nidaja to help him. He decided to help Nidaja, as Lira was only fighting one, the other being more defensive.

Nidaja was not tiring, and she seemed to be trying to figure out the pattern of her attackers the way she taught him to in the few times they sparred.

“Let me slow one down!” Alps barked boldly. One of Nidaja’s attackers turned to face him too late to bring its spear to bear, and Alps slashed it with his staff right across the middle.

“Alps, your weapon won’t work, you have to break or remove the eyes!” Alps then turned and faced the four-eyed Uruk again, which backed off when the former slave’s back was not turned. It was not stupid, it did not want to be touched, and for good reason. “What the hell?” Nidaja cried, seeing the one that Alps hit drop on the ground and start running sideways, going nowhere. She then put essence energy into her arm and cleaved the still-active Uruk in half. The eyes still had to be destroyed, but it didn’t work as well in two pieces, so that last task of jabbing those crystals out of its oval top was easy. She then did the same to the one Alps damaged.

“My staff messes up their essence!” Alps said with pride. “Looks like I can help a lot after all!” he laughed, before bolting toward Lira. Nidaja moved quickly toward Nita. Reika used Bone to savagely crush the face and eyes of the air-jabbing Uruk, laughing maniacally. There seemed to be a lot of pent up hate for the golems that the girl needed to work out. Alps was happy to oblige. He popped the one-eyed defensive Uruk in the back, making it just start walking off in one direction. “Reika! He wants to leave the party!” The hyena bolted past him.

“I can handle this, Alps, help Nita!” cried Lira, seeming to enjoy the exchange of blocking and fighting with the single Uruk left. She was a good fighter, and did not seem to be getting tired. It gave Alps more respect for her. She was small, but a powerhouse. He turned in time to see the higher ranking Uruk backing away from everyone and observing. It was going badly for the Uruk. Two already lay smashed to bits from Reika. One was in two parts from Nidaja, and the other was having its eyes removed as it flailed helplessly on the ground. Another was fighting a battle it likely would not win against Lira. Reika was chasing another that was ruined by that horrible stick Alps was carrying. One was blown to smithereens by a fireball that was cast by a powerful essence user. One moved to defend the leader, and three others inched closer to a large and dangerous-looking Lyat. Nidaja found herself headed off by the one with four eyes, and held at bay by its rapidly flailing guardian.

“You is used to Asuna doomed to die in mines, horrible curse thing!” Lyat barked in the most emotional tone he’d heard. He was joyful at getting to finally kill Uruk, just as much as his sister. He swung his mighty sword, slicing right through a spear, sheering the top of the first Uruk off completely, and smashing the face of the next in a single swing of that heavy blade. Two were gone just like that.

“Asuna is scariest things!” Reika cried triumphantly, tackling her victim from behind, rolling it, and smashing the eyes out with the butt of her bone-club. “Ahahahahaaaa!” She wailed with laughter. The remaining attacker attempting to move against Lyat backed away quickly, but it was not quick enough. He put a foot into the middle of it, his kick so hard it flew back fifteen feet, and then, a mighty jump and his sword came down in the top and middle of it. Alps could not believe Nidaja fought him and survived. He had to have gone easy on her. Or at least, he didn’t have reason to hate her so much. Nidaja bested her two-eyed opponent handily enough right as Lira

sheered one eye, then the other so neatly with a flourish of her slender blade from her silently dropping opponent. It was artistic and elegant.

"He's bolting!" Nidaja barked, pointing out the four-eyed last remaining fighter. He was unbelievably fast, perhaps an ability of one of the additional eyes. Alps gritted his teeth.

"He's going for reinforcements!" But no sooner did he say that than he heard a loud call from behind him.

"*Linista'for-stanararthu'ren!*" The voice was his mother's, and the effect was instantaneous. Roots erupted from the ground just ahead of the fleeing target. It was moving too fast to keep from running into them. It was immediately wrapped in the explosively growing tendrils. Luna held her hand up, her face stern and majestic. Nita seemed doe-eyed as she watched, very much appreciating the show of essence-technique. "*Reneldanadae!*" Alps felt suddenly glad he did not see what followed happen to an Amanian or an Asuna. He might have gotten sick. The roots jerked away from each other in all different directions, tearing the Uruk into six pieces. Lira and Nita both shouted in amazement. Nidaja applauded.

"The Letai are back, you piece of shit!" the general cried. She looked around furtively. "Are there anymore?"

"No!" Lira stated, having already hopped up in a nearby tree at the edge of the river bed. "Oh dear heavens! That lasted less than three minutes!"

"That was a slaughter!" laughed Nidaja. *Clack!* The sound came from Reika. She was tossing crystal eyes into the air and hitting them over the trees with Bone.

"Reika is being so glad she came!" the hyena girl cried.

"Alps, you were so valiant!" Nita crooned, scooping up her lover and hugging him close. He felt better about himself after the fight, but he could not just blow up Uruk from a hundred feet out the way the one fawning over him could, so he could not get a big head about it. "That staff is a lot more useful than I had first felt it to be. We will perhaps want to discuss strategy around that." Nidaja joined her sister in ruffling Alps.

"Indeed! I had no idea. Don't think Alps did either." The white male nodded at the general, letting her know she was right.

"Doesn't pay to underestimate a healer, does it?" asked Lira, smiling up at Luna.

"Not at all." Luna chuckled. "I am not likely to do that to anyone but an Uruk though. Does a lot of damage to the essence in an area to commit such a brutal act." She smiled at her son. "Very good work and quick thinking Alps. You were definitely the right one to bring along."

"If all our fights go so well, I should think this would make a very inspiring tale." Lira stated. "But, for our sake, I hope we don't have many battles between here and there. We just fought a small raiding group. The forts will be much better defended. We will not want to go in without a plan, so no running off all crazy with confidence, okay?" she asked.

"Hey, you don't have to tell me. I'm a seasoned fighter." Nidaja laughed. "Though, we might have to worry about some of us more than others." She nodded over to Reika, who was rolling the midsection of one of the Uruk around happily. She had deeply enjoyed the fight. Alps found himself doubting she experienced any fear at all through all of it. He felt fear though, and now that the adrenalin and excitement was wearing off, he felt a little sick, and sat down off the path, under a tree to rest a moment. Nita sat down too while the others got the supplies back together and boosted their morale even higher by happily talking about the very once-sided fight. Alps looked to Nita and murmured softly,

"It won't always be like that." She nodded softly, still smiling as she looked at the others.

"It won't, but the rewards will continue to be greater. If we accomplish what we are setting out to do, this fight will hardly even be memorable." Alps nodded in agreement. At the very least, history would not likely remember it, and that was sobering because it was, to date, his greatest act of valor for his beloved queen.